Harpsichord & fortepiano

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A Note from the Editors

No irony intended

"Is not the very notion of the authentic somehow, in its own way, bogus?"
Dr Max in Julian Barnes' *England, England* (Jonathan Cape, 1998)

I have just returned from seeing American jazz maestro Uri Caine on his UK tour. Caine uses the music of Mahler to set off magnificent free improvisations. There is some friction between the schmalzy waltzes, symphonic themes and new jazz that make up this potent cocktail, and after the concert I decided to go back to the 'original' and listen afresh to Mahler's symphonies. Had Caine added something to my experience of Mahler? Very definitely: I was aware of the awakening of elements that had previously lain dormant in my aural imaginings of the music. So had Caine, to use a fashionable term, *deconstructed* Mahler? No: Caine had, to use an unfashionable term, *interpreted* Mahler, for at the end of his jazz piece we were still left with our sense of Mahler intact, indeed enriched.

This points to a rift at the very heart of contemporary music-making. Nowadays it is chic to disparage even the least excessive serialism as dry-as-dust modernism and to promote, as an alternative, a postmodernism derived from a polystylistic stance, borrowing from here and there. Whenever such postmodern composers employ different musical styles from those in which they are predominantly working, or turn to quote from pre-existing pieces of music, commentators invariably tell us that the music is laced with irony. This does not necessarily have to be the case, however. Even within the present century, when Stravinsky borrows a Russian folk-song at the start of *The Rite of Spring* and appropriates Bach chorale in *The Soldier's Tale* — or when Berg, likewise, moves off into the realms of chorale at the end of his violin concerto, or Berio uses a Mahler symphony movement for his own contemporary musings in the *Sinfonia* — none of these are ironic references: the music manages to be honest to itself and forms its own (second unfashionable term coming up) *authenticity*. Indeed, it may be argued that irony is strongest in those very structures — whether a Shostakovitch symphony or an Austen novel — which are closed structures and do not look for easy pickings outside themselves.

The link between Uri Caine (or indeed all modern music — including the serial pieces more easily disparaged than actually listened to) and the early music movement, is that they are all searching for an authenticity. Postmodern music, by its very definition, does not allow for authenticity; therefore we can, if we wish, plunder our musical past (as we have already done 'world' music) and devalue it by not believing it to have a meaning of its own, by using it merely as a cheap source of irony.

Authenticity is not the same as respectful subservience to the text, but more about engaging in dialogue with it, and that message comes across strongly in the pieces published in this issue. We start with three articles that ask us to think again about how we play basso continuo. We are pleased to be able to print a fuller account than hitherto available of Philip Pickett's researches into early 17th century continuo practice, carried out in preparation for his recording of *L'Orfeo*. Giulia Nuti has gone back to the original continuo instruction manuals to shed new light on Italian accompaniment practice, and her conclusions do not fit easily with what is commonly heard today. Robert Webb takes a look at Quantz and draws some lessons from it for contemporary performers.

Pamela Nash goes right to the heart of the issue of authenticity in the first of two articles about Bach transcriptions: is there anything to stop us from following Bach's own procedures in order to create our own arrangements of his work? Kevin Malone, an American composer resident in England, shares his experience of writing for the harpsichord — in particular, what you can and cannot express through notation. Sally Fortino, an American resident in Switzerland looking after a collection of keyboard instruments in Germany, is the subject of our cover article. Anyone who curates a collection of historic instruments is a guardian of our most important resource in the early music world. We also present an extended review section with this issue. Our thanks, then, to all our contributors and reviewers.

To be authentic in the late 20th century — with its fakes and forgeries, theme parks and heritage centres, instant access to all kinds of information — is becoming more and more difficult. By asking questions, by believing that answers can be found, by believing in the authenticity of art, the early music movement can play its own part in stopping the slide into a despairing relativism. We are still too embroiled in the complexities of modern life to surrender ourselves to the instant catchphrases of postmodernism. No irony intended.